

## **‘This land is circumscribed’: Performing Limits in *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation***

By Milo Harries

### **Abstract**

This article asks what is at stake when Tim Crouch’s *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* (2019) leaves its audience alone, studying a moment in which the audience are made responsible for the play’s progress. The article proposes that this moment extends and expands upon the central curiosities of Crouch’s work, framing the playwright’s fundamental concern as an enquiry not only into ethics but more broadly into what people will accept. It claims that this focus on acceptance allows Crouch’s theatre to flicker between ethics and ontology, refining a preoccupation with ‘the good’ into a series of experiments around what is held to be good enough. The playwright’s characteristic gesture, this article argues, is the question, ‘is that okay?’—authority, value, and a collective sense of reality deriving not from assertion but a continuous process of consent.

The article argues that this ongoingly negotiated acceptance rehearses social processes that are fundamental to contemporary life. When *terrestrial salvation*’s actors depart, the article contends, it brings to the surface the dynamics of power by which consensual realities are maintained. Drawing on the controversy that followed *The Author* (2009), in this case the article understands this negotiation as an interplay of individual agency and an imagined collective desire—a perceived allegiance to the completion of the play. The article proposes that convention, as a proxy for the audience’s expectation, will shape and restrict the limits within which each individual can act. The article concludes, however, by observing that the play nonetheless insists on the individual’s capacity and right to demur, whether they exercise it or not. It ends by arguing that the mere existence of this choice offers hope for the possibility of change, seeing in the individual the promise of new contracts, new collectives, and new horizons of the real.

Towards the end of Tim Crouch’s *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* (2019), the audience are asked to read aloud (84). From the beginning of the performance, each spectator has had a copy

of the illustrated script, silently reading along at the actors' prompting. Now individual spectators are asked to speak—supervised, at first, by the actors who have played the roles that the audience are taking on. After a little while, however:

*The two actors leave the circle.*

*The two audience members continue reading. (86)*

The spectators are left alone, with each other and with their texts. At the performance I attended, the show kept going as written, the spectators reading and turning pages together until another actor came onstage. Yet this period was marked by a strange sensation: a feeling of power distributed everywhere across the audience, but not concentrated in any one place. There were glances of appraisal, negotiation, co-ordination; problems and questions shared silently around the room. Why were we continuing? Could we stop? If so, how? Who was in charge—and who put them there?

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This article is an attempt to respond to that moment, asking after *terrestrial salvation's* limits and the ways in which they are intuited, accepted, and imposed. In a broad sense, this article and the play it discusses extends the arc of Crouch's career and the scholarship that has accompanied it; though *terrestrial salvation* is a collaboration between Crouch, Andy Smith, Rachana Jadhav, and Karl James, it remains a 'Tim Crouch play' (Crouch qtd. in Ilter 404), with all that that definition entails:

the non-coincidence of actor and character, the overt fictionalization of both performance space and audience, the provocative juxtaposition of real-world materials with language that facilitates alternative perceptions in spectators' minds, and the exploration of complex ethical questions surrounding both authorial influence and spectatorial engagement (Bottoms, 'Authorizing the Audience' 75)

Both play and article carry forward the bulk of these concerns, engaging most of all with the agency, responsibility, and representational potential of the audience. As Smith, Crouch's longtime collaborator, has remarked, 'it is this observer – the audience, the spectators, the creators and destroyers – that have been at the heart of our practice together and apart over many years' ('This book is part of the play').

Seen from one angle, then, *terrestrial salvation* can be understood as a continuation of Crouch's central preoccupations. I will begin, however, from the premise that the play also constitutes a departure of sorts—or rather, that the play allows us to helpfully re-articulate and newly understand Crouch's priorities. Writing in the wake of *The Author* (2009), Stephen Bottoms claimed that Crouch's 'central, insistent concern' is 'the things we *value* – both culturally and personally' ('Introduction' 16; emphasis in original). In my opinion, *terrestrial salvation* reveals this definition to be useful, but incomplete. I would argue that *terrestrial salvation* promotes a reading of Crouch's work that would express Bottoms's thought in relief: that is, the play demonstrates that Crouch is less interested in what audiences positively value than in what they fail to reject. My claim is that Crouch arrives at ethics within a broader examination of acceptance, marrying his ethical enquiry to an equal curiosity towards authority, authorship, and theatrical form. To my mind, Crouch's primary and lasting interest—which takes in both ethics and dramaturgy—is what we will go along with, rather than what we value: were one to look for Crouch's theatrical signature, it would not be 'is this good?', but the question that echoes in various forms through *An Oak Tree* (2005), *The Author*, and *terrestrial salvation* itself: 'is that okay?' (Crouch xv).

Understanding Crouch's central concern in this way—not as an enquiry into what is good but what is good enough—allows for an intuitive connection between his minimalist economies of representation and his plays' ethical work. 'Okay', as a word and a principle, runs through Crouch's work as a marker of authority and negotiation, acceptance and control; to put it simply, Crouch's plays test what people will agree to be part of, both ethically (this is okay)

and ontologically (okay, this *is*). To be 'okay', in Crouch's theatre, is to participate in the progress of the play, with all of its ethical and ontological implications. Most famously, the word haunts *The Author* (170, 177, 184, 188, 194), marking the audience's ongoing responsibility for what they are seeing—as well as the play's ability to ignore them, if they resist. This is a power and a tension teased at in *An Oak Tree*, as well: '[a]re you okay?', the Hypnotist asks the Father, before prompting a response—'[s]ay "Yes"' (61). Discussing the description-propositions that open *My Arm* (2003), meanwhile ('[h]ere I am in my trunks [...] This is the house we lived in [...] This is my dad's car' (25), Crouch stresses the centrality of acceptance to theatrical representation:

This (playful) transubstantiation is achieved through an act of intention— simple as that. He says it, and it is so. In this respect, theater is the ultimate conceptual art form. I say I am Hamlet, and that's what I become! I say I've had one arm above my head for thirty years, and that's how it is[...]. All that's needed is an audience to accept it; for a contract of credence to be established[...]. We believe and it becomes true. (Svich)

Crouch's interest in value, then, could be seen as part of a broader study of the practice of ontology and ethics: an enquiry not into what we value, but what we can be persuaded to believe. Belief, in this framework, is less a positive action than an implication buried in behaviour: as in Stanley Cohen's 'implicatory denial', what matters most is not the belief one professes but the belief one's actions imply (8-9). Crouch's plays return insistently to *behaviour as if*: audiences that somehow behave as if a shoe were a boy, as if spectators bear no responsibility for what they are watching, as if the world might be coming to an end. One might notice, therefore, that although *terrestrial salvation's* back cover refers to 'a man who [...] manipulates a group of people to sit in a place together and believe in something that isn't true' (back matter), Crouch's preface opens up a more detailed account of how 'truth' and 'belief' come to be: he writes again of 'acceptance', and also of 'committing to the story',

‘giving licence’, ‘submitting’, and ‘conferring credibility’ to its ‘fictions’ (‘Parallel Worlds’ xii-xiii). In this system, ‘value’, ‘reality’, ‘truth’, and ‘belief’ are governed not by assertion but by acceptance: the arrival—whether via a shrug, a push, or a nod—at something with which we are prepared to go along.

This emphasis on acceptance foregrounds social processes over (and as) matters of fact. ‘Reality’ is entangled in consensus and power, as it is for Louise in Crouch’s *Adler and Gibb* (2014): ‘I will become your lover [...] I won’t only be the actress who played her, I will *be* her [...] When they think of Janet Adler, they will think of me’ (54; emphasis in original). Returning to the moment described above, therefore, we might now view it as a hole in the ice: a window into the social processes that sustain a consensual world. My argument in this article is that when the actors leave the circle, they bring to the surface one of *terrestrial salvation*’s fundamental concerns, and place at stake a fraught and vital part of contemporary life: the fact that ‘[in] order to have reality, we need to have community’ (Stephenson 232). The spectators discover themselves keeping the play alive, in a particularly pointed example of the principle Crouch puts forward in his preface—that ‘it’s the observer’s acceptance that allows the created world to thrive and expand’ (‘Parallel Worlds’ xii). It is this acceptance that each spectator is in theory now more able to withdraw, reframing and rephrasing an echo of *The Author*: ‘I have the choice to continue./ I have the choice to stop’ (202).

When *terrestrial salvation*’s actors leave the circle, the audience are thus faced with a decision: go along with the script, and the charted future it represents, or claim the authority to depart from it. This choice, however, has a context—a vacated circle, at the performance I attended, that was alive with catching eyes and turning heads. The questions this moment created—What do I do? What are we doing?—framed each person’s decision-making against and alongside the decisions of the rest. In this moment, as he does in *The Author*, Crouch ‘makes his spectators hyper-aware of themselves as a group experiencing the same event’, whilst nonetheless preserving an ability ‘to individualise spectatorial

response – to authorise his audience' (Bottoms, 'Materialising' 454, 448). The actors' departure, while forcing the question of the individual's acceptance of the play, its world, and its authority, at the same time exposes their involvement in a collective act. Each person can decide not to continue, claiming the authority to deviate from what Smith elsewhere describes as 'what's allowable, or what's allowed, in the frame that we create' (qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 429). Yet—for better or worse—in dissenting, they threaten the progress of the group, and the completion of what it has gathered to achieve. At stake in each individual decision is the survival of the play: the practice of a consensual reality, and the powers, pleasures, and possibilities that it contains.

The central act of this article is to ask what is found within those limits. *terrestrial salvation's* spectators are left within a border that they have played a part in producing, but which they cannot individually decide. Following Kirsty Sedgman, I will ask what *terrestrial salvation's* spectators do with and within this horizon, '[negotiating] the boundaries of their preferred experience amongst themselves' (24). First, I will ask what is opened, in that moment—who is present, and what the audience is being offered—arguing that the spectators, left with their scripts and with each other, are less alone than they might think. Next, I will ask how and why the play might carry on or be carried onward, considering the pressures that convention and expectation might surface in the circle. Weighing the entitlements associated with the performance of a play, I will argue that each spectator experiences limits whilst becoming those limits for others, as individual agency comes up against an imagined collective desire. Finally, I will ask what the play's progress represents, and what this moment might achieve. As it travels through this pause, I will suggest, *terrestrial salvation* disrupts the 'culture of stasis' that lurks along the limits of its regulated world, clinging instead to what David Greig describes as 'the very possibility of change' (qtd. in Edgar 68, 66).

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What happens, then, when the actors leave? What are the audience being offered? From some angles, this moment might appear as a moment of individual and collective empowerment, especially in the context of Crouch's long-standing desire to 'authorize the spectator's participation in the performance process' (Bottoms 'Authorizing the Audience' 67; emphasis in original). The play's economy of representation, founded on the spectators' illustrated scripts, might be seen as a particularly readerly iteration of Rancière's emancipated spectatorship, each person '[composing] her own poem with the elements of the poem before her [...] refashioning it in her own way' (13). In rehearsal, the actors and production team referred to the scripts as the 'set' (Smith), implicitly styling it as a resource that offers each spectator the opportunity to produce a shared but nonetheless personal version of the play. By the time the circle is vacated, the audience have already been recruited to serve what Seda Ilter identifies as 'the main motives in Crouch's theatre', 'eschewing mimetic realism and psychologically driven acting methods', and '[moving] the authority and theatrical transformation off the stage and into the auditorium' (396). Is it so unreasonable to suppose that the audience are being granted power to accompany their responsibility, left to take charge of the process in an echo of the way Smith characterises *terrestrial salvation* as a whole: 'an invitation to come and play' ('This book is part of the play')?

The playtext poses a problem, however: the actors leave, but the audience are not left alone. The scripts remain, and with them a voice that flickers between observation and imperative: '[t]he two audience members continue reading' (86); '[t]ake your time' (87). The sensation recalls the moment where Sol 'senses the presence of her father' (31)—an authority persists, uneasily present on the page. The experience of reading, even silently, no longer feels entirely private, chiming with an argument Bottoms makes in relation to *The Author*: 'one could argue', he writes, 'that by co-opting our imaginations in this way, Crouch makes the violence and abuse seem all the more "real"' ('Materialising'

459). The way Crouch recruits his audience's participation can feel less emancipatory than invasive; in *terrestrial salvation* the privacy of reading is compromised, its freedoms less assured. These kinds of feelings complicate Smith's 'invitation to come and play':

the experience of perceiving and accepting an invitation is, at basis, an experience of self-agency, but it will often contain moments when an intuition occurs that a route has been pre-planned for us, that our actions have been pre-conceived. At moments like this self-agency is inflected with something different, with a feeling that it is diluted, an intentionality based on an awareness of another's influence in shaping our actions (White 59)

These flickers of unease gesture towards the fact that although the spectators are 'authorized', they are not this situation's 'procedural authors': *terrestrial salvation* might be an invitation to come and play, but the audience cannot choose the game (Murray 152). 'Procedural authorship', as Janet H. Murray explains, means 'writing the rules for the interactor's involvement [...] [creating] not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities' (152). The text demarcates the spectators' horizons, '[their] limits and the possibilities within those limits' (White 59); the world of the play is channelled, and claustrophobic: as Sol says, '[e]verything is determined' (56). The 'sanctioned' choices (35) exist within the framework laid down by the procedural author, who 'knows how it ends' (45); power flows from the ability to control the future, to write and 're-write', even after being proved wrong: '[h]e'll re-write, of course he will. And off you go again. New hope. New expectation' (85).

When the spectators start speaking by themselves, then, a question arises—the same question an actor playing Anna has posed to a spectator playing Sol, moments before:

ANNA                      Are you just saying what you've been  
told to say? (60)



This kind of joke, a familiar trope in Crouch's work, might slide the spectators past the question's full weight.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in Crouch's writing, the work's grip on the audience has been tighter, the structure more aggressively imposed. The audience cannot interrupt *The Author*: Crouch recalls that 'many times people called on me to stop. And I wanted to stop. But that is not the play I have written. The play carries on' ('Response and Responsibility' 417). In *terrestrial salvation*, however, instead of being unable to make it stop, the spectators are required to make it go: when the actors leave the circle, the audience are made responsible for the play's progress; they are the ones answerable to the presence on the page. This responsibility brings with it a choice—to continue along the script's charted path, accepting its authority and the limits of its world, or to halt its progress, exchanging its frames for whatever might succeed them. Anna's question, then, is deceptive: it is not just a case of saying what we have been told to, but also a question of deciding, individually and collectively, to obey.

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What goes into that decision? When the spectators read the direction, '[t]he two audience members continue reading' (86), what makes it come true? The beginnings of an answer can be found elsewhere in Crouch's defences of *The Author*, where he states his belief that 'we, as performers, have to pledge allegiance to the text' (qtd. in Bottoms 'A Conversation' 424). There is an obligation in the text, for Crouch: a duty and an impetus, that overrides even his own agency as an author-actor. 'We will not stop', he continues; '[w]e are absolutely rigid about that, because I think that's doing a disservice to the integrity of the text' (*ibid.* 425). Crouch and Smith stress the fact that *The Author* is a play *per se*, claiming that this endows it with the right and responsibility to keep going when challenged. For Smith, a play brings with it a particular disciplinary structure, a 'frame' that gives it the authority to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the moment where the actor playing the Father in *An Oak Tree* is required by the text to remark, as if they were breaking character, that the play is 'really well written' (94).

be performed as planned, and in full: '[p]erhaps we have this idea [...] that it's all allowed: "come on man, it's all allowed, it's a happening!" But it's not: it's a play' (*ibid.* 429).

Moving from *The Author* to *terrestrial salvation*, it seems fair to say that when the actors leave the circle, the audience are called to pledge a similar kind of allegiance. I would argue that this call was answered, in the performance I attended, because of individual assumptions about a collective desire: that the play carries on because each spectator believes it is what the other spectators are likely to want. This expectation is visible in—indeed, sits at the heart of—Bottoms' and Smith's defences of *The Author*, which has a responsibility, for Bottoms, to 'those who have come to see and hear and respond to the play as written' ('Materialising' 456). For Bottoms, the audience, by and large, want the play to remain intact: they have arrived expecting the 'integrity of the text', and deserve a commitment to it. Smith agrees:

most of the people in the audience have come to see a play. The situation is that we're at the Royal Court, or the Workshop Theatre, or wherever – that's where plays happen. And it says on the poster, 'a play by Tim Crouch'. If you're here for something else, then maybe our job has been confused a little (qtd in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425)

There is a great deal to grapple with here.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, what matters most is the perception, true or not, that most spectators will arrive at *terrestrial salvation* wanting and expecting 'a play' to be performed as written. In each of the play's diegetic and extradiegetic worlds, it might be true that '[if] people are unhappy they can leave', that they are 'free to go', that '[no] one's here against their will' (58). But the decision the spectators must make is

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<sup>2</sup> Most obviously, perhaps, around the way *The Author* retains some of the authorial privileges of 'playhood' whilst attacking those habitually claimed by the spectators. See in particular Read and Frieze in Bottoms ('A Conversation') and Henke ('Precarious Virtuality').

neither abstract nor ahistorical. They are enclosed within a horizon, within limits, confronted with a decision about how to participate, and constrained by a sense of social acceptability: as Gareth White observes, '[the] horizon is a limit in the sense that it stands for the point at which [...] invited and appropriate action ends, and inappropriate responses begin' (59). The performance I attended was at the Royal Court, 'where plays happen': in this context, it is not unreasonable to expect this drive towards a conclusion to gain some kind of normative weight—a sense that the other spectators are owed something, as Bottoms claims.

Where Helen Freshwater suggests, then, that the anger amongst some spectators of *The Author* is 'partly a product of the fact that they don't know which social script to follow' (409), I want to suggest that part of the problem *terrestrial salvation* poses is, in a sense, the reverse: that the spectators' supposedly independent reactions exist in a matrix of consensus and coercion, powered by an implicit sense of a socially and dramatically 'pre-determined pathway' (Upton qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425). With the imagined endorsement of the group, the script in each spectator's hands is an invitation and expectation to follow the path—to finish the play as written, as advertised, and as promised by its surroundings. Crouch-as-Miles is speaking to all of the audience's roles when he exclaims, '[l]ook where we are now! There's no going back, right? It's too late to walk out now, right? Someone?' (102). The social script associated with a play at the Royal Court—'where plays happen'—finds form as an allegiance to the performance's progress: the text not only expects but actually prescribes the answer to Miles's questions—'Yes' (102; emphasis in original). 'Most of the people in the audience', one might be expected to think, 'have come to see a play' (Smith qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425); the script, accordingly, represents an instruction to continue: '[the] play carries on' ('Response and Responsibility' 417).

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What is at stake in this progress? What is proved, if *terrestrial salvation* carries on? On the surface, the answer might seem bleak: the play's journey towards its ending could be said to reveal the coercive force

of communities of belief, each individual performing their exposure to the hostility of the group. Yet even an untaken opportunity—even just a glance, flickering across the room—insists on what David Greig calls ‘the very possibility of change’ (qtd. in Edgar 66). Within the story, the world Miles creates is one that does not admit a certain form of progress: even if his predictions are wrong, Anna says, ‘[h]e’ll re-write, of course he will. And off you go again. New hope. New expectation’ (85). Anna’s ‘again’ is instructive: Miles’ world is a ‘culture of stasis’ (Greig qtd. in Edgar 68), the renewal is a repetition, another iteration of the same systems and structures of power. What Anna is offering Sol, by contrast—to borrow a different thought from Greig—is a moment of transcendence: a tear in the fabric of the real (Greig, ‘Rough Theatre’ 220). This is an escape from the compound’s confines, certainly, a journey beyond its limits—but more importantly, it is a chance to set horizons of their own.

The actors leave the circle, then, and the spectators face a choice. Most likely, the play continues; the structures stay the same. But the fact that the decision arises insists that the spectators could choose differently—that they live in a world where another world is possible. The individual is not erased by the group, even if they struggle to negotiate their agency within it, and they carry with them the kernel of a different consensus, the seed of a different social life. More justly, then, the play can be understood to be engaged simultaneously in two modes of theatrical relation. On one hand, it offers the binary pairing of ‘audience’ and ‘work’ that Alan Read finds at the heart of ‘theatre as propaganda’ (94)—structuring a stable collective encounter with a static authorial world. On the other, the individual detaches from the collective, smuggling their independence within an expanded theatrical triad: ‘the performer, the audience and you’ (*ibid.*). In this thought, perhaps, we can discover the ethics that underpins Smith and Crouch’s desire to ‘complicate the togetherness that theatre can bring’ (Smith)—a conviction, after Levinas, that ‘Man’s [*sic*] relationship with the other is better as difference than as unity: sociality is *better* than fusion’ (Levinas qtd. in Kearney 58).

By making them solely responsible for the play, *terrestrial salvation* asks its audience to consider how realities are sustained, raising up for scrutiny a basic function of theatre and a vital part of social life: the stable continuous becoming of a world. They are asked to co-operate, invited to sustain the world already conjured, the progress of the play. Within that process, however, individuality—suppressed but surviving—maintains within it the possibility of change: new collectives, new worlds, new ways to re-group. In a recent paper, Smith expressed the hope that ‘through telling stories in this way, through play, we might acknowledge and consider our own power as well as that of others’ (‘This book is part of the play’). Through this lens, *terrestrial salvation* offers the theatre as a space of realisation: a place where things are made real, and made known. The play picks out the production of its present, tracing the horizons that its audience have agreed. In doing so, *terrestrial salvation* finds a source for Smith’s hope in the classic concerns of a ‘Tim Crouch play’, insisting that if we are responsible for our actions, we must retain some capacity to act; if we give these worlds power, we must first have had some power to give.

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